

A DAY AMONG THE BLACKBERRIES.

BY FANNIE W. MARSHALL.

JIM'S grandmother was a firm believer in the somewhat old-fashioned notion that every boy was in the world for the sole and express purpose of being made useful ; and so, when Jim mentioned at the supper-table that he had seen that afternoon a field "cram full of blackberries," about two miles distant, his grandmother saw in the fact a providential opening for replenishing her stock of blackberry-jam, which was almost exhausted, and at the same time for keeping her active grandson out of mischief for an entire day. She promptly seized the opportunity, and suggested that Jim should start early the next morning, carrying his dinner, and spend the day in the berry pasture. Jim's face began to lengthen at the beginning of his grandmother's remarks, but at the mention of "dinner" it was shortened again by a very broad grin which overspread his face, for he knew by experience that a cold dinner prepared by his grandmother was a thing to delight the heart of a hungry boy. The expedition at once assumed the air of a picnic, and supper was scarcely over when he was out of the house in search of his two special chums, Sammy Clark and Tom Perkins, to engage them to become his companions.

The bright July morning of the following day found the three boys trudging along the country road while the dew still sparkled on the grass and clover by the wayside. Across the fields came the fresh scents of early day, and, though boys are not generally supposed to be particularly susceptible to the charms of nature, a feeling of the beauty about them seemed to filter into their little beings in some way, for Jim said, taking a long draught of the sweet air, "I say, fellows, is n't this fine?" Jim was eleven and his companions ten and twelve, but they always addressed each other as "fellows,"—*boys* being quite too lowly a term to apply to persons of their size and experience.

With the single remark just quoted, they dismissed the usually prolific topic of the weather and sauntered on slowly, swinging their large, bright pails and chattering away about the new dog that Tom's uncle had promised him, which was reputed to possess many canine accomplishments.

From that subject their thoughts naturally turned to the circus which was coming to town the next week, and as they happened to be passing a soft bit of turf at that moment, they called a halt while

they attempted, with rather discouraging results, to emulate the feats of dexterity set forth on the gayly colored posters announcing the show, with which the town was extensively decorated. Failure at last convincing them that they could not, without more practice than they had been able to devote to the enterprise, successfully compete with the contortions of Signor Giuseppe Francatelli, they loitered on their way again, planning how they should spend the money gained by their day's work, for they had been promised two cents a quart for all the berries they should bring home.

With this and various other themes they reached the scene of their labors, and then a knotty point presented itself:—Should they start from the road and pick toward the back of the field, or, should they go to the end of the field, where it bordered the woods, and work toward the road?

All three sat themselves down on the stone wall to discuss the matter ; not that it made any particular difference where they should commence their devastating labors, but from a lingering disinclination to "begin." It certainly was very pleasant to sit in the shade of the leafy roadside maple, for the morning had grown warm and the blackberry-field did not look altogether inviting, lying unsheltered under the hot sun.

At this point Dan, an underbred-looking dog belonging to Sammy, that had enlivened the affair with his presence, started some small four-footed creature from its cover, and, forgetful of heat, berries, grandmothers,—everything but the chase, the three boys followed Dan as fast as their young legs could carry them. After an exciting run, they came up with the dog. He was dashing excitedly about a heap of stones into which his expected prey had disappeared, and giving short barks of anxiety lest he had lost his game.

The most skillful and diligent prodding by the boys among the stones, failed to induce the terrified little animal to come forth and be devoured for their edification ; and after an hour of vain endeavor, with frequent exclamations of "There he comes!" (which he never did, as he was by that time snugly tucked away in his home underground) they finally gave up the attempt to dislodge him and toiled slowly back to the spot where the berry-pails had been abandoned, sud-

denly becoming aware that it was a long walk, and also that it really was a very warm day.

Arrived under the maple-tree again, they acted upon Tom's suggestion that they should sit down and "cool off" before "pitching in again,"—though why "again" they might have found difficult to explain if they had looked into their empty pails.

At last there seemed no longer any reasonable excuse for delaying the business of the day, and the three comrades clambered over the wall and began to walk slowly toward the farther end of the field, picking as they went.

Either Jim had been deceived in the richness of the field, or some industrious pickers had been there before them, for the end of a half hour found them in the shade of the woods at the other side of the pasture with perhaps two quarts of berries among them. Suddenly Jim was struck by a thought—"Look here, fellows, is n't Bates's Pond round here somewhere? Grandfather showed it to me one day last summer, when we were coming 'cross lots.'" None of the boys knew just where the pond was, but it was clearly their duty to inform themselves as to the exact whereabouts of an object of such interest within only two miles of home.

They quickly scaled the low wall that skirted the woods, and a short walk brought them to a little clearing. There, sure enough, lay a small pond glinting in the sunlight, its pebbly margin overhung by bushes and tall trees,—just the spot to delight the heart of an idle urchin. Our boys would have been more than human could they have resisted the coaxing ripples that lapped softly against the bank, as the faint breeze ruffled the water here and there; then, too, the pails had been left behind and could not, therefore, act as shining reminders of the duties the boys were neglecting.

In an incredibly short space of time three small suits of clothes and six dusty, stub-toed shoes were lying on the grass, and three heads were bobbing about in the water as their respective owners splashed and floated, dived and re-appeared, in a state of perfect enjoyment. After what seemed to them an unreasonably brief swim, they emerged with dripping locks, and by the aid of two pocket-handkerchiefs, which a careful search brought to light, they were enabled to dry, and to clothe themselves once more, although an occasional "Ow!" from one or the other announced that a rill of water had parted company with a lock of hair and, obedient to the great law of gravitation, was slowly traveling earthward by way of the spinal-column of the speaker.

When the boys climbed back into the field more than an hour had elapsed, although they were in

blissful ignorance of the fact. Jim and Sam, however, readily acquiesced with Tom in thinking that "a fellow gets awful hungry, goin' in swimmin'," and Jim accordingly proposed that they have a sandwich apiece before resuming their arduous labors. This being agreed to, they made their way back to the pond, as offering the most inviting spot in which to refresh themselves.

An examination of the dinner-basket revealed such a tempting collection of good things, that one sandwich was followed by another, and that by some cold chicken, and that by some doughnuts, and those by some gingerbread and cheese, and that by some gooseberry-pie, and that would probably have been followed by something else if it had not been that there was nothing more to follow. As it was, they agreed that just a few blackberries "to top off with" would be a satisfactory conclusion to the meal. Tom was dispatched for the three pails, while Jim and Sammy amused themselves by skipping stones across the water.

A sudden crash and an exclamation from the returning Tom announced an accident, and, following the sound, they found him picking himself up from the ground, still clutching the handles of the pails, but with the berries,—alas!—scattered abroad. The combined efforts of the three could recover only about half of the original store, and, as it really was not worth while to keep so few, they ate these as the best way of disposing of them.

Very few of us, I think you will find, are really energetic after a hearty meal—indeed, physicians tell us that nature always calls for rest at such a time. Shall we, then, blame our boys if they yielded to this instinct for repose? Sammy and Tom propped themselves lazily on their elbows, comparing jack-knives with a view to "swapping"; Dan, at a little distance, was crunching the last of the chicken bones, and Jim lay on his back at full length, with his hands clasped under his head, in a deliciously dozy state, watching through the interlacing branches above him the few white clouds as they sailed slowly by high in air.

At length Tom and Sammy, having satisfactorily settled the jack-knife trade, followed Jim's example and, after a few remarks at long intervals, silence fell upon the group. All nature about them seemed to be breathing a lullaby, in which the soft whirring of insects, the occasional call of a bird, or the clang of a far-off cow-bell, the lapping of the water and the faint rustling of the leaves above them, made a drowsy melody that might have soothed a careworn brain to rest. What wonder, then, that our boys yielded to the spell and dozed

and slept in sublime forgetfulness of the fact that their respective families supposed them to be toiling among the blackberry briars.

A half hour — an hour, flew by before Jim opened his eyes lazily and with a tremendous yawn and various contortions of his body called out, "I guess we 'd better get to work, fellows; I shall be going to sleep if I stay here much longer." His voice recalled his companions to temporal things, but, curious to relate, not one of those three boys suspected that he had been asleep.

"Don't I feel just lazy though," said Tom, yawning. "I should n't be s'prised if another swim would freshen us up and make us work enough smarter to pay."

"I should n't wonder if it would," said Sam, reflectively, slowly chewing a long spear of grass.

"We only need go in for a minute or two," added Jim.

This unanimity of opinion could have but one result; and the bobbing about, the splashing, floating, and diving of the morning was repeated. It was rather unfortunate that Jim, in putting away his handkerchief after it had again done duty in its new capacity, should have found in his pocket a small fish-hook, while Sam brought to light, from a similar hiding-place, a fragment of twine; for it certainly was not to be expected that the conjunction of a hook, a line, a wood full of poles, and a pond could be disregarded by our young friends. That nothing might be wanting, a plump grasshopper came whirring by just as the hook was ready for his reception, and, in a moment more, he was being skipped gayly over the water, impelled by Jim's rather unskillful hand, with the idea of deluding any fish that might be watching his gambols into the belief that he was practicing a few fancy hops for his own amusement.

All of my readers who are, or have been, boys, know how absorbing the occupation of fishing can become, even if there is only one pole to three fishers and each is obliged to wait his turn to indulge personally in the sport. A dozen "shiners" were swimming about in one of the berry-pails,

which had been filled with water to receive them, when Tom's attention was attracted by some field-hands coming toward them, carrying their dinner-pails. "What are they stopping work for at this time o' day, I wonder?" he said, and as they passed he casually inquired the hour.

"Well, I guess 't ain't fur from half-past five," was the reply.

Half-past five! The boys gazed at one another in open-mouthed dismay. Two miles from home, supper in half an hour, three empty pails and three expectant families awaiting their arrival!

It was a trying moment. Sam and Tom looked at Jim with the faint hope that he would suggest some way out of the difficulty, but poor Jim was as powerless to bring back the wasted hours as many a greater than he, with far greater need of them, has been. He seemed plunged in a fit of deep abstraction for a few moments and then said gloomily, "I s'pose we 're in for it; — it 's too late to try to pick the berries now. Let 's have another swim! It 'll be just so bad anyway, and 't ain't likely we 'll get here again *this* summer."

At half-past seven o'clock, three boys with three large, empty pails (for the fish had been left behind) came slinking into the village and sadly separated where three streets met. I will not cast a gloom over my readers by a circumstantial account of what befell two of the boys, but will only say that Jim spent the following day in the old attic, a solitary prisoner upon bread and water, except when his grandfather, who had once been a boy himself, and had not quite forgotten the peculiar temptations which assail the species, came softly upstairs, unbolted the door, and, cautiously entering, drew a handful of cookies from his pocket and sat by, regarding Jim sympathetically, while the hungry prisoner ate them, until the whistle from the big shop called him back to his work and Jim was left to his own reflections once more.

All this happened twenty-five years ago; and Jim told me the other day that, all things considered, he was n't sure that he was *very* sorry he did n't pick that pail of blackberries.

